

Study of HRM Strategies for Empowering Call Centre Staff

Karen Mei Yun Chan

Graduate Student, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Email: Kaz <Cherryzzz@msn.com>

John Chelliah

School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Email: john.chelliah@uts.edu.au

Douglas Davis

School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Email: doug.davis@uts.edu.au

Profile

Douglas Davis teaches in the areas of operations management, quality management and strategic management. His current research interests are in the areas of quality management, six sigma and management consulting. Prior to joining UTS, he taught engineering in Papua New Guinea, headed an energy conservation group in local government in the U.K and spent sixteen years in engineering and management posts in a number of other U.K. organisations.

ABSTRACT

This study of the Accor call centre in Sydney is designed to show how employee empowerment practices that evolved at a time of significant competitive challenge to the business are viewed by employees working as call centre consultants. It also demonstrates how empowerment works both in essence and content terms within this service-oriented environment. The findings confirm that employees view empowerment initiatives as enhancing their motivation levels and as a positive factor that contributes to their job enrichment, organisational learning and higher productivity.

Keywords: Employee empowerment, Employee Involvement, Job enrichment, Organisational Learning, Call-centre Management.

INTRODUCTION

In developed countries, employees increasingly expect to have a voice in organisational decision making and to achieve more from their jobs. Providing empowerment to employees is a way in which these aspirations can be achieved (Hilgen et al.1997). Wood et al.(2001) describe features needed for a team to achieve empowerment. These features encompass the need for a strong and close relationship between team members as well as processes that use and blend individuals' talents with aim of achieving

the organisation's goals. They (Wood et al., 2001) also point out that motivation of all team members is an important ingredient in this quest.

This study covers call centres and the specific issues faced by the call centre staff in relation to empowerment. Call centres are service centres acting as interface between clients and the organisation which they serve. These centres could be run in-house or outsourced to external providers. One key strategic HRM issue faced by such centres is capacity management (Betts, et al., 2000), that is dealing with variation in demand from customer for their services (for example, seasonal surge in demand for services from customers). Operationally, this poses problems for HR planners within these call centres. Solutions to these problems can often come from call centre staff involved in day-to-day operations. Service literature suggests that appropriate support for front-line workers, like those working in call-centres, can enhance their performance, which in turn contributes to customer satisfaction and hence to increased competitiveness (Heskett et al. 1995). A study of call centres in the UK (Betts et al., 2000) demonstrates that performance of staff can deteriorate if adequate staffing is not in place to meet surges in customer demands that occur seasonally. In the process of making available the appropriate support, HR planners may wish to consider empowering their call centre staff to assist in initiation of operational solutions. This staff involvement will strengthen the ultimate solutions that are formulated in tackling capacity management issues.

The study reported here investigated the practices for empowering staff in a service-oriented call centre operated by the Accor group in Sydney. A case study approach was used to test a number of hypotheses based on a concept map. A broad literature review was undertaken to identify key concepts and variables related to empowerment. Different perspectives of empowerment and controversial issues related to its application were also researched in the literature. Using the literature review a concept map was constructed that provided a framework describing the various component of team empowerment and how they might be related in order to achieve effective practice.

A sample size of thirty call centre consultants were selected for the purpose of administering the questionnaires from around fifty consultants who work on different shifts in the call centre. In-depth interviews were conducting with five employees to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of employee involvement and empowerment. The paper presents a summary of the literature review followed by a description of the methodology used, the key results and discussion and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Like the description of ‘the quality of mercy’ in Shakespeare’s play – ‘The Merchant of Venice’, empowerment can bless both those who give and those who receive it. This literature review examines the notion of empowerment, particularly in relation to group work. Variables that influence empowerment are identified and explained. Table 1 is a summary of the variables related to empowerment uncovered in the literature review.

Most definitions of empowerment see it as two-sided arrangement between managers and their subordinates that can lead to mutual benefit. Management give authority to subordinates that enables them to make decisions and exercise power beyond what they had previously been able to do. This additional autonomy can lead to improved worker performance. Lussier and Poulos (2001) describe empowerment as power given by top-level management and delegated to subordinates who are influenced by this power to drive performance forward. A number of definitions of empowerment mention the benefits that can accrue to those workers that are empowered. For example, Whetton and Cameron (2002) see empowerment as enabling people to improve their inner self, develop their self-confidence and through these changes, they are motivated to take action and accomplish tasks. Manning et al. (1996) contend that empowerment of workers is needed to increase morale and improve quality of their work performance.

Foy (1994) focuses on power in her definition, defining empowerment as providing people with power to have their voice heard. Generally, the literature reports significant benefits for both organisations and workers if empowerment is applied appropriately. Wall and Wall (1995) describe how empowered employees have lower anxiety and resistance to change as they have a better understanding of why changes are being made.

The literature on groups and group/team work is large and stretches back beyond the seminal work on group dynamics by Cartwright and Zander (1960). The literature covers aspects such as how teams form, how decisions are made, risk taking, leadership etc. Comparisons are often made between the performance of teams and individuals. Clearly, empowerment is an important issue in the group/team context. Scott and Jaffe (1991) and Wood et al. (2001) describe team empowerment in terms of team cohesiveness, with strong relationships between team members and utilizing their talents to achieve team goals. Robbins et al. (2004) point out the importance of empowerment in self-directed teams which take charge of many of the responsibilities of their supervisors. Parry (1996) in turn stresses that with empowered people can control their own destiny and can become effective leaders themselves. Barker (1993) vividly demonstrated in his ethnographic study that self-managing teams can evolve control systems that are extremely bureaucratic and inflict considerable pain on team members who do not comply with team norms. Marshall (1995) hypothesised that leadership should be seen as a function

shared by many people, not just a position held by one person and to ensure success of the organisation. Thompson (2000) points out the importance of empowerment in her model of team empowerment as a continuum where Level 1 is when teams newly form and usually lack skills, experience and power to implement control to the highest level (Level 4) where self-directed empowered teams work independently and are involved in important decision making.

Much of the literature on employee involvement is directed towards the issue of empowerment and the benefits that this can bring to the workplace. One study (Hutchison et al., 2000) of the RAC customer services call centre in the United Kingdom found evidence of higher productivity and job satisfaction among workers who were given more control of their jobs. Latham and Ernst (2006) through a literature review of the history and theory on work motivation in the twentieth century, concluded that employee involvement had a positive impact on employee attitudes and that employees were keen to have more say in decisions that affected their jobs. Manning et al. (1996) report research that supports the notion that employee participation can have a positive impact on business success. Some authors warn of potential problems with employee involvement schemes. According to Godard (2005:168), supervisors may react negatively to employee involvement because they fear that “it will reduce their freedom to make unilateral decisions”.

The case for the learning organisation has become generally accepted. Sofo (1999) for example, points out that organisations have to become ‘learning organisations’ to remain competitive, as learning is becoming central to productivity improvement. In recent years, there has been a large increase in knowledge workers, whose jobs are subject to technological changes and whose work objectives are often customer focuses (Plunkett and Fournier 1991). According to Lawler et al. (2001), knowledge management practices and employee involvement are strongly related because employee involvement programs encourage workers to understand their work and business environment. Maietta (1995) defines empowerment as management and subordinates working together where managers encourage staff to ask questions to help them identify where the troubles lie and find ways to manage them.

Interestingly, Whetten and Cameron (2002) define empowerment as enabling people to improve their inner self such as developing a sense of self-confidence, energizing people to take action and motivating people to accomplish a task. In a similar vein, Sofo (1999) defines that a learning organisation is one in which managers encourage staff to ask questions to find the problems and to find solutions. Sofo (1999) further clarifies that in a learning organisation environment employees see themselves as autonomous, talented and independent having a greater potential to realise their freedom and capacity to act with self-confidence and greater knowledge and demand greater interactions. Sofo believes that becoming a ‘learning organisation’ is a way to remain competitive because learning is the heart of productivity activity where knowledge generates productive capacity (Sofo 1999:323).

The Price Waterhouse Change Integration Team (1996) in their study have found how the restructuring and downsizing this past decade has permanently disillusioned employees from the idea that all organisations are stable but they welcome empowerment as they seek this opportunity to take more initiative, make better decisions and exert influence in the workplace. Price Waterhouse recommends that managers should be clear on which decisions are the most important, who are responsible for making them and allow everyone in the organisation to become familiar with these decisions. This includes where responsibilities begin and end.

METHOD

Case study methodology was used for employed in this research. In employing this method the researcher has to decide whether to focus on a single case or on multiple cases. Single case studies usually involve a critical case, or rare and unique cases or when the case serves a revelatory purpose (Yin 1994). The topic under investigation was of a revelatory nature and therefore a single case study of a large call centre was carried out.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this research, surveys were used in addition to interviewing. Case studies may benefit when the same questions are posed from two pools of respondents (Yin, 1994). In this research a larger pool is the subject of a questionnaire survey and a smaller pool is the subject of the interviews. The answers can be compared for consistency and reconfirmation. Moreover, respondents can provide us with valuable facts regarding specific situations and contexts, particularly in situations where their opinions are negative. The setting is flexible and relatively unstructured which allow the respondents to feel at ease. The survey and interviews were based on the literature review. Table 1 summarises both instruments, indicating the variables and the source from the literature review.

Table 1: Variables identified as having an impact on empowerment

Variable	Definition	Issue	Authors who mentioned variable
Involvement in teams	a group of people who form a team with the ability to manage themselves and	improve performance	Wood <i>et al.</i> (2001); Scott and Jaffe (1991); Carlopio <i>et al.</i> (2001); Heskett <i>et al.</i> 1995
	organised to accomplish tasks where team members work	more independence	Thompson (2000)
	and help one another	more decision making	Thompson (2000); Marshall (1995)
		more responsibility	Robbins <i>et al.</i> (2004); Marshall (1995); Belbin (1997); Barker (1993)
		share leadership role	Marshall (1995)
		threat to managers	Fisher and Fisher (1998); Wood <i>et al.</i> (2001); Price Waterhouse Team (1996); Marshall (1995); Storey (1995); Plunkett <i>et al.</i> (1991)
Having sufficient information about organisation	people who have all the information about all that is going on in the organisation	higher level of productivity	Scott and Jaffe (1991); Bailey (1995); Price Waterhouse Team (1996); Belbin (1997)
Having power and control	to have the ability to do or act, to have influence and authority to be able to accomplish objectives	better decision making	Maietta (1995); Foy (1994); Price Waterhouse Team (1996)
		improve performance	Lussier and Poulos (2001); Heskett <i>et al.</i> 1995
		more responsibility	Hilgen <i>et al.</i> (1995); Wellins <i>et al.</i> (1991)
		improve leadership skills	Parry (1996)
		improve satisfaction	Wall and Wall (1995); Wellins <i>et al.</i> (1991)

Variable	Definition	Issue	Authors who mentioned variable
Employee involvement	involving employees in all organisational activities such as decision making and problem solving to enhance performance	increase morale	Manning et al. (1996)
		higher level of productivity	Manning et al. (1996); Hutchinson et al. (2000)
		more freedom	Carlopio et al. (2001); Kotter (2002)
		better resistance to change	Hutchison et al. (2000)
		more decision making	Hutchison et al. (2000) Wellins et al. (1991); Latham and Ernst (2006)
		greater recognition	Manning et al. (1996)
		improve mgt & employee communication	Paauwe, J. and Boselie, P.(1997)
		improve satisfaction	Hutchison et al. (2000); Latham and Ernst (2006)
		more commitment	Millward (1994); Storey (1992); Cully et al. (1999)
		threat to managers' freedom to make unilateral decisions.	Heller (1998); Godard (2005)
Job enrichment	ways to add complexity and meaningfulness to a person's	promote interest	Stone (2005);
	job such as skill variety and autonomy to increase worker	greater recognition	Stone (2005)
	performance and job satisfaction	higher level of productivity	Stone (2005)
		enhance satisfaction	Stone (2005)
Motivation	that which energises, directs and sustains human behaviour	improve competency	Adler (1927); White (1959); Harter (1978)
		higher level of productivity	Ketchum and Trist (1992)
		more freedom	Kotter (2002)
		more confidence	Whetten and Cameron (2002)
Knowledge workers	people capable of gathering, storing, share and applying	more customer focused	Plunkett and Fournier (1991)
	knowledge that can enhance competitiveness and whose	more innovative	Plunkett and Fournier (1991); Amar (2002); Starkey et al. (2004)
	primary job responsibilities involve knowledge work	more responsibility	Plunkett and Fournier (1991)
		more independent	Sofo (1999)
		more self-confident	Sofo (1999)

Variable	Definition	Issue	Authors who mentioned variable
		more decision making	Sofo (1999)
		higher level of productivity	Sofo (1999);Hutchinson et al. (2000)
		better problem solving	Sofo (1999)
		improve competency	Lawler et al. (2001)

The company selected for this study is Accor Group, which is one of the world's largest hotels and tourism group with hotels and resorts in many different countries worldwide. The company's brand hotels are internationally recognised as leaders in their markets, combining uniqueness in character with new style and technology. Compared with other leading hotel groups such as Starwood, Intercontinental, Marriott or Hilton, the company faces fierce competition but as an already well-known and established overseas hotel provider, it has maintained a strong position amongst other groups and will continue being so with many recent openings in the Asia Pacific region. The company's global network brings with it access to a state-of-the-art reservations system. This reservation system has been in use by all of its call centres and is currently connecting each of its hotel's reservation networks worldwide. The Sydney-based reservation services centre is one of the company's largest hotel call centre in the Asia Pacific region.

There are approximately fifty multi-lingual call centre consultants speaking in eight languages and receiving around three thousand inbound calls per day from customers around the Asia Pacific region wanting to make hotel reservations. In this call centre, the management team consists of a Regional Director, a Call Centre Manager, a Human Resources Manager, a Statistics Analyst and Project Manager. The project manager leads the team of consultants and is in charge of the Administration Department which handles daily incoming faxes and email reservations. To ensure maximum productivity, the call centre focuses heavily on coaching and developing the skills of its consultants to maintain high levels of both employee and customer satisfaction. A sample size of thirty call centre consultants were selected for the purpose of administering the questionnaires from around fifty consultants who work on different shifts in the call centre. All thirty responded to the questionnaire and provided responses that were suitable for inclusion in the analysis. For the in-depth interviews, a sample size of five was selected to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of employee involvement and empowerment.

The questionnaires covered questions related to the first four categories (A to D) below while the interviews covered all the categories including an additional category E:

- A. Team Involvement
- B. Knowledge
- C. Employee Involvement
- D. Job Enrichment/Motivation
- E. Knowledge Workers

The questions in the survey related to the variables in Table 1. The questions required responses on a five-point Likert scale where 1 =No; 2= Mostly No; 3= Don't Know/Uncertain; 4= Mostly; 5=Yes. The findings will assist in identifying the degrees of varying opinions of the respondents in relation to these variables.

RESULTS

Generally, the research investigates whether employee empowerment in a call centre enhances employee satisfaction, team motivation, job fulfillment and responsibility. The findings are as follows.

Team Involvement

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents to the questionnaire felt that when a group of people are allowed by their supervisors to organise and manage themselves to accomplish tasks, their performance improves. A significant majority (83%) often engaged in helping other team members in daily tasks to enhance team performance. A significant majority (71%) reported that more team involvement led to improved communication with other team members. Slightly more than half (53%) reported that they were encouraged to work independently by their supervisors drawing on their own and team knowledge and skills thereby reducing the level of supervision. Almost all those interviewed felt that the nature of the call centre environment requires teamwork to enable individuals to attain their work targets. They also felt that teamwork lifted morale and raised individual level of performance.

Information as Source of Empowerment for Individuals

Nearly three-quarters (70%) of those surveyed believe that greater employee involvement in business processes increases their motivation level. A majority (86%) reported that their supervisors encouraged them to express opinions on ways to enhance job performance and 70% reported that they were allowed to give input into training procedures. Those interviewed revealed that weekly meetings were held by supervisors to update staff on recent events involving the company. In addition, prior to starting their daily tasks, staff were required by the company to keep abreast of developments through

reading a daily computer generated journal which detailed inside and outside news about the company. All interviewees felt that having knowledge of the products, prices, reservation system, and knowing what is happening around them, gave them a sense of control towards achieving their work goals. The interviewees believed that this empowered them to deal confidently with their dealings with clients.

Individual Employee Involvement

A large majority (86%) surveyed agreed that in this call centre supervisors encouraged them to freely express their opinions on enhancing individual job performance and 70% felt that this lifted their morale. Those interviewed were generally of the opinion that involving employees in decision making and problem solving creates a positive atmosphere because it generates a sense of belonging to a team which in turn motivates them to perform better. Some interviewees felt that this positive atmosphere made it easier for supervisors to delegate tasks to their charges. However, there was a downside to involving employees in the call centre. All interviewees agreed that in situations where their opinions or recommendations were not accepted, there was a greater likelihood of friction between team members. The process of involving employees in problem solving and decision making was also seen as time consuming. However, overall employees were supportive of employee involvement initiatives.

Job Enrichment

Slightly more than half of those surveyed more than a half (63%) expressed a strong sense of achievement in their jobs. A significant number (86%) indicated that job variety enhanced job satisfaction while 73% of the view that granting of job autonomy or freedom to employees to perform the job as they saw fit was an indication of well-placed trust on the part of supervisors.

In the main, those interviewed believe that being able to achieve what they want makes a job more meaningful. This increases their motivation to perform well which in turn could lead to higher remuneration. Some of the advantages of job variety, according to the interviewees, are being able to broaden knowledge and the ability to use an individual's full potential. Some felt that it makes the job more interesting and opens up opportunities for career enhancement. Half of the interviewees believe that there was job variety in their daily tasks. Some have the opportunity to work in other Departments for several months and some have transferred permanently.

Incentives are generally thought to be good for motivation. One of the interviewees believed that when she receives incentives for performing well, it enhances her level of motivation. Every organisation has a set of rules and regulations to which all staff must comply and this call centre is no exception. There are rules regarding dress code, appropriate language on the phones, times for logging in and out of the phones, limits on talk times on incoming calls, etc. The opinions expressed by interviewees towards these

rules were mixed but they saw rules as requiring compliance. However, they often felt that these rules restricted their freedom and at times found them de-motivating.

Call Centre Consultants as Knowledge Workers

Two thirds (66%) of survey respondents reported that the call centre management encouraged them to share their creativity and ideas with each other and nearly half of the respondents (43%) agreed that they were encouraged to share with employees from other departments. This demonstrates that there is a fair amount of communication between and within departments. Almost all (96%) of respondents feel that sharing knowledge and ideas with one another does have a direct relationship with being better informed, and therefore enhances the call centre's collective ability to achieve its goals.

Those interviewed generally believe that employees become knowledgeable when they are kept informed of all essential business information. The interviewees view themselves as reasonably well informed employees and reported that other employees who wish to draw on their skills and knowledge frequently approached them. Innovation in the workplace is seen by all interviewees as important. They were unison in their perception that fresh ideas and creativity can contribute towards improvements. Overall, they also felt that their organisation values innovation and sharing of knowledge, but some voices go unheard and they do not invest enough in technology or keeping employees up-to-date with innovations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm that the research by Scott and Jaffe (1991) and Hutchinson et al. (2000) that team involvement improves performance is also true for this call centre environment in Australia. Further, Hutchinson et al. (2000) found evidence of higher productivity when workers helped each other. In the present study, majority of the respondents agreed team members should help one another to lift performance. A significant number of respondents reported that more team involvement led to improved communication with other team members and this concurs with the findings of Millward (1994) and Storey (1992). The call centre findings however do not agree with Storey (1995) and Wood *et al* (2001) who state that supervisors may react negatively to employee involvement which may threaten their job security or lessen their power. In this research, slightly more than half of the respondents felt that their managers and immediate supervisors were encouraging more team involvement suggesting that upper level management is not opposed to more employee involvement, but is in fact in favour of it.

Marshall (1995) hypothesised that leadership should be seen as a function shared by many people, not just a position held by one person and to ensure success of the organisation. The findings to a degree confirm this in relation to this call centre because slightly more than half surveyed (53% agreed) that they

were encouraged to work independently by their supervisors drawing on their own and team knowledge and skills thereby reducing the level of supervision.

Sofo (1999) defines that a learning organisation is one in which managers encourage staff to ask questions to find problems and to find solutions and where employees see themselves as autonomous, talented and independent having a greater potential to realise their freedom and capacity to act with self-confidence and greater knowledge and demand greater interactions. This knowledge creates productive capacity. The findings show that the call centre does practice empowerment and may therefore be seen as having some characteristics of a learning organisation as majority of the respondents felt that they were actively involved in solving the problems and that they were encouraged to voice their opinions as to how to improve business processes. Hutchinson et al. (2000) found that employee involvement and employees having more say does lead to satisfaction among workers which is complemented by Wellins *et al* (1991) and Manning et al. (1996) who reinforce that this results in improvements in worker attitudes. 70% of respondents have positive attitudes and feel motivated by more participation. In addition, Latham and Ernst (2006) point out that employee involvement means allowing employees to participate in decisions that are likely to impact upon their jobs. The findings show that a majority of respondent were allowed to give input with regard to decisions relating to their jobs.

Respondents find job variety a motivator (86%) and believe job satisfaction can be gained from it. Stone (2005) calls this job enrichment and he believes that it promotes job satisfaction. In relation to job autonomy or job independence, almost three quarters of respondents (73%) were motivated when given freedom in their job. In addition, they appreciated the trust of the supervisors in allowing the respondents to exercise such freedom. With regard to strict rules and regulations inside the call centre, some employees were more tolerant than others in observing them. Some felt that these rules and regulations too restrictive and was a source of demotivation. Team involvement depends very much on the members helping one another and working together efficiently as a team whereas employee involvement depends on the individual's motivation. The term empowerment can be defined as involving employees in organisational decisions as well as allowing them to have the freedom to work independently (Hilgen et al.1995). The findings show that employees are generally encouraged to share knowledge and ideas as a result these employees feel empowered and this raises the level of motivation.

Wellins, Byham and Wilson (1991) expressed the view that that empowered individuals will show more initiative and enjoyment in their work and this is the case with this call centre as a majority of the respondents felt empowered which seems to have a positive effect on their level of motivation. Whetten and Cameron (2002) define empowerment as people developing a sense of self-confidence while Sofo (1999) describes empowered people as having the knowledge to act with self-confidence. These notions are supported by the findings in this case study.

The Price Waterhouse Change Integration Team (1996) reinforce this with their theories that empowerment can work and survive into the future if team members and managers are given the same information. Almost all (96%) of respondents feel that sharing knowledge and ideas with one another does have a direct relationship with being better informed and this enhances the call centre's collective ability to achieve its goals.

The case study is a good example of the issues of empowerment and its relationship in terms of workplace involvement, job variety, motivation and knowledge in the context of call centre environments. It illustrates how call centre consultants are levels of motivation are raised when they feel empowered through their supervisors:

- allowing them some freedom in the way they carry out their daily tasks;
- facilitating employee input into problem solving and decision making; and
- encouraging sharing of knowledge.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of this study especially the fact that it is based on a single case study of one call centre. Nevertheless, it is revelatory Australian study is worthy of note.

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